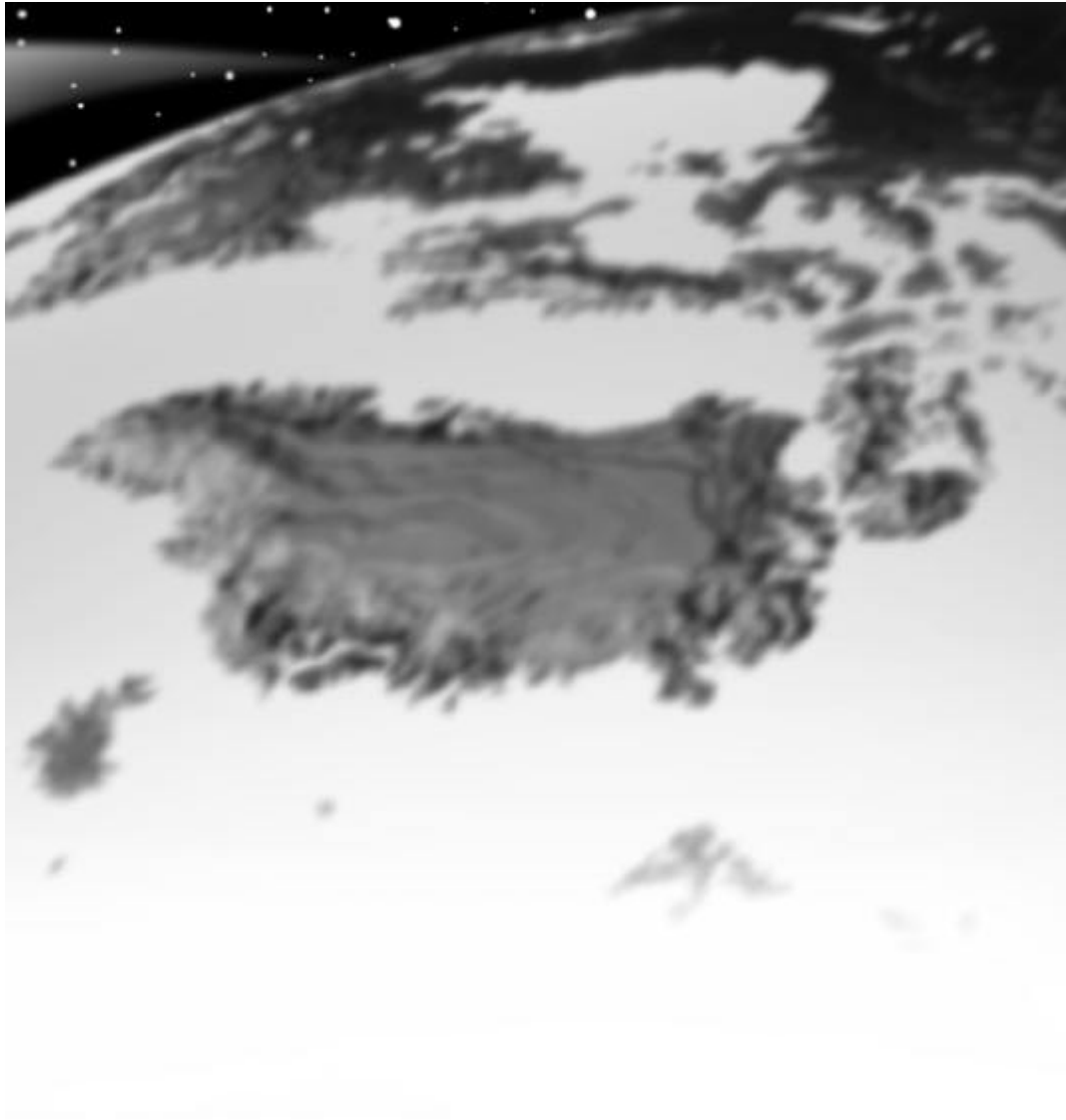




# The Air Expeditionary Force

Taking the Air Force into the Twenty-first Century

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**W**ITH THE DEMISE of the Soviet Union and the resulting lone superpower status for the United States, revolutionary changes swept through the American military. For the United States Air Force, reorganization was probably the most dramatic and far-reaching change. Now, five years after reorganization, another innovative Air Force approach may very well have the same far-reaching implications for the application of American airpower. This new concept, the Air Expeditionary Force (AEF), makes the final transition from a force founded on the strat-

egy of forward-based presence to one built on the vision of global engagement. The brainchild of Lt Gen John Jumper and his Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) staff, AEFs are now rolling across the Southwest Asian deserts like the whirlwinds the region is famous for.

What exactly is an Air Expeditionary Force? What are its mission, capabilities, and roles? What constraints affect its application? An Air Expeditionary Force is an airpower package (usually between 30 to 40 aircraft) that national command authorities may deploy to defuse a developing crisis situation, to quickly increase a

theater's airpower capability, or to maintain a constant theater airpower capability. An AEF is comprised of units that have previously deployed and trained together and are now postured for short-notice crisis response.

The mission of the Air Expeditionary Force is to give regional commanders in chief (CINC) rapid, responsive, and reliable airpower capabilities and options that meet specific theater needs. In the days of the cold war, the stateside Air Force concentrated on generating and launching aircraft from the continental US (CONUS) to reinforce forces engaged in the European or Pacific theaters. US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) and Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) units were "fight in place" forces located in established operational bases. Therefore, the stateside focus was on the ability to deploy aircraft, equipment, and personnel quickly from home station. With the closure of a number of overseas bases and our possible involvement in regions with little if any American military infrastructure, rapid deployment can be only one measure of merit for today's CONUS-based airpower.

Now we must be able to launch from CONUS, fly nonstop to our destination if possible, and then generate combat sorties upon arrival. If all we consider is our ability to launch within 24 hours of an execute order, we focus on only one aspect of the global engagement doctrine. Airpower does little for a regional CINC facing a crisis if it takes two or three days to arrive in-theater and then another few days before a combat sortie is generated. The goal of the AEF is to launch combat sorties in-theater 48 hours after an execute order is issued and then sustain combat airpower for the duration of the conflict or crisis.

In order to meet many of the CINC's taskings, AEFs are configured with basic capabilities inherent in strike packages—air superiority, precision strike, and suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD). Other necessary capabilities such as command and control, jamming, electronic intelligence (ELINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) interception, combat search and rescue, and air refueling would in most cases be provided by in-place theater assets. Sending AEFs to parts of the world without such in-place

assets would require deploying those assets also. A typical AEF package comprises 30 aircraft—12 air superiority, 12 strike, and six SEAD fighters. However, based on the CINC's requirements, the package could be tailored to meet specific needs and theater threats. In cases where in-place tanker assets are not available or are unable to provide required support, an AEF would also include four tankers. The number of personnel required to support the fighter package alone comes to 1,000 and increases to 1,175 with the addition of tankers. With this force, the AEF could generate between 40 and 60 combat sorties per day in support of the CINC's campaign plan. Additionally, CONUS-based bombers could launch from the United States and be integrated into AEF strike packages. From a roles perspective, planners envision the AEF operating in three scenarios—as a deterrent, an additive force, or a filler force, if required.

In the deterrent role, perhaps a simple statement from Washington that an AEF has been put on alert would be enough to deter or deflate a potential crisis. If not, the actual launching of an AEF to a crisis environment would send a very strong signal to any potential aggressor of America's intention to resort to military force, if necessary. An inherent advantage of the AEF is its rapid response. Within 48 hours of a national decision, the United States would have combat airpower in the region ready to engage.

The additive role would occur in the event that a regional CINC felt the need to increase airpower in time of crisis or heightened tensions, or just to preclude either. An AEF could be quickly deployed into the theater, and the additional shooters would significantly enhance a CINC's combat capability in short order.

Finally, when a carrier gap is projected for an area of responsibility (AOR), an AEF could either be put on alert for possible deployment or actually deploy to the region to bring the theater airpower up to the level enjoyed before the carrier departed. Although the exact capability on board a carrier and that possessed by the AEF are not a one-for-one match, there are enough similarities (excluding support assets) to offer at least a reasonable substitute combat capability.

This final role could be viewed by some as an Air Force effort to replace the carrier. Nothing could be further from the case. At present, the United States does not possess enough of any one type of airpower, land based or sea based, to fill the many assignments levied on American forces these days. However, by efficiently blending sea- and land-based airpower, the United States has the force structure necessary to handle most, if not all, situations. Simply stated, the AEF is but another option decision makers can use to handle difficult situations. If a quick response is needed and a carrier is not in or close to the AOR or if an increase in airpower is required, even though a carrier may be in the AOR, then perhaps the AEF can meet the need. If, on the other hand, some of the constraints discussed below prevent the formation of an AEF, then a carrier is the obvious solution. Regardless, the AEF is an attempt to bolster US airpower options and capability, not an attempt to replace one for another. Land-based and sea-based air have unique characteristics and capabilities just as they also possess their own unique limitations. The key for decision makers faced with a crisis is to determine what airpower capabilities are required and what constraints affect the particular situation. From there, a decision can be made whether the answer is the AEF, the carrier, or both.

As alluded to earlier, the AEF is faced with constraints like any other military force. The favorable resolution of these constraints is always required before considering the deployment of an AEF.

First and foremost, an AEF would require access to the host country and/or clearances into any airspace that requires transit to get to the fight. This access will always be an operational constraint for an AEF, and one that diplomatic and military officials must successfully deal with in order to make the AEF a viable option for national decision makers. Granted, most countries in crisis situations tend to grant access readily, but there may be instances when US decision makers consider a situation "a crisis" before this assessment is realized or shared by the host country and its neighbors. Such situations will make

access extremely challenging for negotiators, and without access the AEF is not an option.

Second, an AEF needs an established base (usually an operational host-nation base) to furnish a runway, an area for a tent city, and some basic water and fuel infrastructure. It would be impossible to fly into a nonoperational field and expect to be able to launch and sustain combat sorties shortly after landing. Although the requirements would be minimal, an AEF must operate out of an established base in a host country in order to meet the combat sortie requirements immediately.

Third, strategic airlift and tanker assets must be made readily available. At first glance, one might think this would create a severe constraint. However, the deployment of an AEF would most likely occur during periods with normal day-to-day airlift requirements, not, for example, during a severe crisis, a major regional conflict about to erupt, or early in an isolated crisis situation. In such cases, an AEF should be able to gain top priority for that period. The airlift requirement has not been fine-tuned to date, but will probably fall in the neighborhood of 50 to 60 C-141 equivalents depending on the amount of prepositioning in-theater.

Finally, the ability to get munitions into the location can be both a logistical and diplomatic issue. Prepositioned dumb/smart bombs along with missiles, either brought in on deploying fighters or airlifted, will offer initial combat capability. But to sustain operations, munitions transfer will be required. The key, of course, is moving the munitions from in-theater locations rather than from CONUS in a timely and efficient manner. Though certainly not a showstopper, this constraint has to be dealt with up front along with all the others.

Assuming the constraints are favorably resolved, one could envision the following scenario unfolding with a fully developed AEF. Wing commanders of designated CONUS AEF units receive a call from higher headquarters warning of a possible AEF execute order. (Note: the idea of a completely cold-start, shot-out-of-the-blue, no-warning-whatsoever scenario is probably unrealistic. Although such a scenario is possible,

recent contingency deployments have included some strategic warning before execute orders.) Immediately, the affected units begin to ready for an execute order by canceling routine training missions, uploading external fuel tanks on aircraft, placing personnel on short response times, and prepacking some equipment. If the execute order does not come shortly thereafter, the wing returns to normal operations; if it does, the wing is properly postured. When the execute order does come (usually within eight to 72 hours), three to four geographically separated wings simultaneously begin generating aircraft, packing equipment, and mobilizing people. Within 12 hours, the first airlift aircraft depart CONUS with personnel and equipment. An additional 12 hours later, the fighter aircraft launch on their deployment as the first airlift missions are touching down at the host AEF destination. Personnel begin to unload the airlift aircraft and pull prepositioned equipment out of expandable shelters, otherwise known as K-spans. When the fighters arrive, they are turned and uploaded with munitions where required, and deploying pilots are replaced by rested pilots who came over on the first airlift aircraft. Shortly after touchdown of the last deploying fighters (usually five hours), the first combat launch of the AEF takes place. If all-out hostilities have started, the members of the AEF would live out of the K-spans and eat meals ready to eat (MRE) until either there is a lull in the action or time permits erecting a tent city. Once in-theater, resupply lines would be established, and the AEF would continue to generate combat missions in support of the CINC's campaign plan.

To date, the Air Force has not developed the AEF concept to the point described here; however, significant progress has been made. Three AEF deployments have been completed, one in Bahrain, one in Jordan, and the third in Qatar. Each has lasted approximately three months, and when completed has left some prepositioned equipment (vehicles, tents, ground equipment, bombs) in K-spans for future deployments. The first AEF to Bahrain used a reduced force of 18 aircraft and 600 people. The AEFs in Jordan and Qatar used the typical force structure and person-

nel of an AEF (34 aircraft and 1,175 personnel) and operated for three months flying combat missions in support of Operation Southern Watch. Two more Southwest Asia countries are expected to host AEFs in the next nine months.

AEFs I, II, and III have built the necessary minimal infrastructure and developed, in concert with their host countries, the plans to accept an AEF on short notice as discussed above. CONUS-based wings have been assigned for these locations: Langley AFB, Virginia, is the core unit for Jordan; Moody AFB, Georgia, for Bahrain; and Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina, for Qatar. This is a takeoff on the Checkered Flag programs of cold war days when CONUS-based wings were assigned to European bases. Langley, Moody, and Seymour Johnson have developed command relationships with their hosts, along with detailed plans, to accommodate the set-up and operation of a follow-on AEF. These plans will be reviewed and updated through periodic visits from members of the core units to their host countries, and by future AEF deployments.

An inherent advantage of any land-based deployment is the opportunity to develop and enhance working relationships with the host country. The AEF deployments have been no exception; and in the Bahrain, Jordan, and Qatar experiences, US airmen interacted with their host counterparts in professional and social settings for three months. The results of these interactions were instrumental in increasing cooperation, understanding, and mutual admiration between our countries and our air forces. As a matter of fact, all three countries regretted seeing the AEFs leave and look forward to the next deployment. This time spent together, sharing expertise and helping one another, will pay huge dividends for the United States in this region for years to come.

Once AEFs IV and V have completed their initial deployments, built some minimal infrastructure, and developed the necessary activation plans, the AEF concept will be an up-and-running option for the Central Command (CENTCOM) AOR. However, the CENTCOM AOR is certainly not the only application for an

AEF. The Pacific, Southeast Asia, South America, and even parts of Europe may be very viable locations for an AEF.

Another possible spin-off of the successful implementation of the AEF concept is reduction of deployed force structure overseas. This could result in significant decreases in the number of days deployed for Air Force personnel. Certainly, being tied to a beeper at Langley AFB, Virginia, is a better option than being deployed to Southwest Asia on 90-to-120-day stints. However, before any serious thought is given to deployed force structure reductions, the AEF has to prove it can accomplish its demanding mission.

As the Air Force enters the twenty-first century, it must prepare itself to furnish devastating

combat airpower at a moment's notice anywhere in the world. This force must be able to mobilize and deploy rapidly; upon arrival, it must be able to respond to the CINC's wartime air tasking; and finally, it must be able to furnish reliable and sustained airpower.

AEF II deployed to Jordan nonstop in 13.5 hours, launched an air tasking order (ATO) combat package of 14 aircraft into southern Iraq on an Operation Southern Watch mission five hours after arrival (total of 43 hours from execute order), and maintained a 98.6 percent mission-effectiveness rate during a three-month deployment. It can be done, and one day it will be done! ☐

*Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep our mind young.*

—Henry Ford